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The HRD Roller Coaster

Recently I stood at the base of the highest, steepest, and fastest roller coaster in the world. I didn't ride it. I don't do roller coasters anymore.

I thought about the organizations that have performance charts matching the profile of a roller coaster track. I thought about the organizational riders who, like the experienced rider of a roller coaster, will tell you how much they enjoy riding—the thrill of the wait, the climb, the peak, and the drop. I watched those who mastered the roller coaster dismount coolly, eager to ride again. Even in the midst of the jerking, tugging, and clanging of the ride, they were explaining to other passengers the intricacies of the ups and downs and how the system works. They were telling the others that extreme variations make riding fun and were trying to persuade them to master riding, too—preferably with “no hands.” I don't do roller coasters anymore.

It seems to me that the managers of organizational roller coasters have two options. One is to master the riding (to learn how to enjoy variations in the trajectory of the organization's performance), and the other is to master the ride (to smooth out the variations). I don't have to cite sources about the propensity of U.S. managers to master the riding; it is all too familiar to most of us. Mastering the ride, smoothing out the performance variations in that roller coaster, requires a deep understanding of the substance of the business and the human beings affected by it—a formidable task.

The HRD professional, as either a member or a tool of the management team, is often a partner in mastering the riding. A simple example is teaching employees how to manage personal stress instead of teaching managers to change conditions that cause stress. As a result, HRD professionals typically get in the roller coaster car with the others and cajole, humor, and “group process” their fellow employees throughout the ride, only to load up again for the next trip (provided they are given another ticket by management).

Organizational managers who lead without a long-range view or consistent purpose discourage HRD from adopting a long-range view or consistent purpose. Ironically, the chaos derived from this type of leadership gives HRD a steady stream of crisis intervention business. It also keeps HRD from contributing substantively to the improvement of the organization's human capital.

Organizational roller coasters are often a direct result of inadequate leadership, which invariably limits the true contribution HRD can make. Others have portrayed the problem in a number of ways. Rummel (1989) quips, Pit a good performer against a bad system, and the system will win every time. Senge (1990) tells us that our views of leaders are rooted in an individualistic and nonsystematic world view. Deming (1986) speaks of constancy of pur-

pose, rather than the raw pursuit of money, as a means of succeeding in business. Rummler, Senge, and Deming highlight smart systems, competent human beings, and sociotechnical means of sanely achieving important goals.

Management's job is to work relentlessly to improve products and services through the expertise of the work force—to sanely go about achieving important goals. The HRD professional has theories and tools that managers need to get their leadership job accomplished. HRD leaders need to gather available tools, to master the tools, to display them in a logical and inviting manner within their organizations, and to propose their application in several areas:

- Defining organization performance and the causes of performance
- Forecasting financial benefits of HRD investments
- Defining and documenting expertise
- Facilitating the growth and expertise of CEOs along with everybody else in the organization
- Developing and releasing human potential
- Helping organizations change from roller coasters to jet planes.

Smart managers and HRD professionals don't do roller coasters anymore. The new ride isn't as exciting, but it is more rewarding.

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